

IN: You once told me that no one else was photographing grain elevators, so it seemed like a useful thing to do. How come you think it's useful?

DM: What a terrible question to start with. It's useful in the sense that anything you collect is useful, and I'm sort of an insatiable collector, and it's much more fun to collect visually things that other people don't collect. You can excise that one. I think that my interest in buildings is predominantly buildings that other people have tended to ignore. If you look at the pictures that I've taken over the last ten years, the grain elevators are just one instance of vernacular architecture, architecture where there's no sort of name-plate attached to it, it's very hard to go back and find out who designed a certain warehouse, who designed the grain elevator. And I guess my attraction is partially because it's anonymous, it's otherwise not recorded, and partially because it serves a very useful function, which tends to be overlooked.

IN: Do you, yourself, consider these buildings to be important, even though they are anonymous, even though they have not been accorded any type of importance by other people?

DM: Oh yes. I think that the grain elevators are probably some of very most important architecture in Montreal. In fact, I

think if you sort of gave me power over the city and someone said that the Eglise Notre-Dame was going to be torn down or grain elevator number one, I would certainly choose to have Eglise Notre-Dame torn down. That's just a much less innovative and functionally important building. No, I intended that quite seriously, actually. I do think that the grain elevators are very significant architecture. They're a form which originated in Montreal, and you can't say that for very much of Montreal's architecture, at least not the stuff that survives. It's a technology that was exported all over the world. Any grain-producing area in the world has Metcalfe grain elevators, and, again, you can't say that most of Montreal's architecture is imported from other areas in the world. This is some of relatively little that's been exported. And so I think it's important both as a sort of stylistic progenitor as well as just buildings that served a useful function at one point and deserve to be remembered rather than simply torn down.

IN: When you photograph them, do you try to photograph them in such a way that you will give them importance?

DM: Yes, although I must say it's pretty hard to avoid doing that. They're big. If you've ever stood at the foot of one of them, you realize that rather than sort of presenting them as monuments, you're really just representing them as

monuments. It's not like photographing other buildings in the city, where a building that I might consider to be stylistically or functionally important sits surrounded by all kinds of garbage and it's very hard to discriminate the good stuff from the bad stuff and try to photograph the building in such a way that it's not confusing. The grain elevators are pretty much isolated, the way they stand, and so I think it would be harder not to photograph them in that monumentalizing way.

IN: When you photograph the grain elevators, often you have instances of a detail, and then the whole elevator, but you don't see much of the surrounding environment, and then the elevator in the context. What makes you photograph in those different modes, or what's the objective of doing that?

DM: Two things. First of all is obsession. If you photograph the same thing over and over again over a period of years, as I tend to do, it helps if you photograph it in different ways. People get a little less bored that way. People tend to look at my pictures and say, that's just a building, I've seen that before. But that's on one hand. On the other hand, buildings can be seen in different contexts. I already mentioned that the context of the grain elevator is very different than the average office building in Montreal or in any other city. Its context tends to be a more open space,

railroad tracks, shacks, loading towers, things like that. And it's a little bit easier to isolate it from that context. But also I think it's important in terms of understanding the function of anything that you photograph, I'm talking here from a somewhat documentary viewpoint, when you photograph something, that's a certain amount of information. But without some kind of overall context, it's lacking information. If you want to continue that a step in the opposite direction, if you photograph a building, and that's a given amount of information, then you photograph that building in an overall context, that's more information that you fit the first picture into. If you photograph a detail, that gives you details of construction which, in addition to being visual punctuation, are also just informational. It's much easier to see details of construction in a close-up view than it is in your context shot.

IN: When you were photographing in Old Montreal prior to the harbour, what would you do in order to separate the good from the bad?

DM: You're sort of grinning a bit there, I have to admit that good and bad has to be fairly subjective judgment here. I don't always agree with people who are more architecturally informed about what's good and bad. A lot of times, people think that a building is good and I think that it's really

quite uninteresting because I've seen it in similar forms in many other places and it's been photographed millions of times, it's just not interesting. What do you do to separate out, let's say, interesting or significant from insignificant, how about that as a slightly less loaded phrase. Partially, it's lighting. If you simply wait until the sunlight is on the building you want and the one you don't want is in shade, that's a pretty obvious method. Part of it's viewpoint. I generally tend to take a very face-on view, very rarely an oblique view, so you're very much less likely to get things in that you don't want, it's a very straightforward, very obvious, and time-honoured tradition of, well, you're interested in one thing and so you plop your camera right down in front of it and you take its picture. You don't allow yourself to be confused by looking down streets, taking the oblique glance. And then, lastly, I suppose, there's just the way you print. You can tend to darken certain things or lighten certain things in order to draw attention, and I allow myself those romantic excesses.

IN: I know in the photographing of grain elevators, I suppose in other architectural subjects as well, you use a method of two exposures. Can you just talk about that?

DM: Giving away trade secrets, sure. A long time ago people realized that in order to capture the extreme contrast

range that you get in bright sunlight onto film, or I guess it would be collodium wet plates, in those days, it helped sometimes to take an exposure in the sun for a brief period in order to get shadows and modulation of the facade that you were photographing, but in order to get shutter detail and fill in details of both highlight and shadow areas, you then capped your lens back and waited for a cloud to cover the sun, and then you popped your lens-cap off and you did a longer shutter exposure, which gave you your basic exposure. Now, this worked just fine in the collodium wet plate period, because things didn't move that fast, and the other great advantage is that the collodium wet plate didn't record clouds. Now, when I do this, sometimes what happens is the clouds move in the field and I have to abandon the shot, and the other thing is that cars tend to move a little bit faster than horse-drawn carriages, and so, if you look very carefully, you'll see about half of a car or a ghost car way back, a couple of blocks away, in the image. And although the building will be beautifully delineated, there'll be these kind of quirky ghost images that you have to look for.

IN: You're now working on a new project dealing with parking lots. Do you see parking lots as another vernacular, cultural symbol, if you like?

DM: I do, but to begin with, I don't think it's a new project. What happens is, I get obsessed with all this ridiculous

stuff, you know, grain elevators, warehouses, the parking courts behind warehouses, and one thing leads to another, and the next thing you know, instead of photographing the buildings and the space that they define, I end up photographing the spaces, with the buildings on the edges. Instead of having the buildings define the spaces, I'm having the spaces define the buildings. Part of it is that I used to take great pains to avoid cars. Any sign of the twentieth century was ruthlessly excised from my photographs. But as time grew on and I got older and wearier, I decided to capitulate. What happened was, I decided that as the spaces became more important, so did the uses of the space, and since much of Montreal's empty space is used for parking and not parks, and for cars and not people, I decided it was a bit silly not to photograph it and document it. And so now I would say that my project, if you will, what I've been photographing for the last few years, is not so much parking lots, generally, as empty spaces and the buildings around them, that define those spaces. So the two major orientations are, in fact, parking lots and construction sites, which are the two sub-categories of unused space in Montreal.

IN: But to go back to my question, do you see them as, say, cultural symbols of contemporary life?

DM: Well, a parking lot's no more a cultural symbol than anything else is, but on the other hand it's no less a cultural symbol or function of cultural usage. It's just that over the years, I guess not suddenly, but it's taken a while, my resistance has been worn down. I'm not prepared to admit the existence of these cultural symbols, or at least visually to admit their existence. A car's no longer something which irritates me when it pulls up in front of a building I've carefully set up in front of, but it's an actual part of the environment now, visually speaking. I don't think that parking lots are more or less symbolic or important than any of the other detritus that we've surrounded ourselves with.

IN: You once talked about grain elevators as being forms of sculpture. Do you consider the unused space as the same thing?

DM: In the sense that they're different types of sculpture. You might have positive sculpture and negative sculpture, and space, empty space or quasi empty space is always viewed as the negative side of that. So sure, it's sculpture. If you look at recent photographs, it tends to be a kind of negative that fits the positive. You can sort of plug a grain elevator into the space. I know, I'm grinning, I can't help it.

IN: I know that in the early seventies you worked with a 35-mm camera, but since then you've been working exclusively with large format, up to eight by ten. Are you going further than that?

DM: Well, actually, for the last two years, I've worked almost exclusively with eleven by fourteen. The spaces are bigger, so I need bigger film to get all that useless information onto the film. I haven't actually used 35-mm seriously since about 1971. I bought my first four by five in 1971, and it was love at first upside-down sight. And, for some reason, the film format keeps getting bigger. It's true, I am looking for a sixteen by twenty now.

IN: Why do you use large format as opposed to 35-mm, given the subject matter that you shoot?

DM: That's almost too obvious, in a way. A 35-mm camera, it's like asking somebody, why do you do heroic stature acrylic, heroic-size acrylic or oils instead of pencil sketches. 35-mm has such obvious and limited uses, and large format has such obvious and limited uses. The more you like picky detail, and I just love trivial detail, the bigger your format should be. And so people who really love detail really love big cameras. When I photograph a parking lot, and two blocks away there's a row of high-rise buildings, and when I

make that print and you can see detail inside the windows of the buildings, that's why I use large format. The ultimate technological voyeur.

IN: Are there other photographers in Quebec whose work interests you?

DM: Yes.

IN: Who are they?

DM: Hmm. Clara's pointing to herself in the background. I'm not sure how germane this question is.

IN: I'm trying something out in order to see whether or not I can use this question in order to make a link between people all the way through the text, so it's that optic that ...

DM: Okay, but you asked me about in Quebec, and in terms of in Quebec, I think there are relatively few people whose commitment to large format and obsession with petty detail is quite the equivalent. In any case, if I tell you people whose work I like in Quebec, a lot of them are going to end up being 35-mm photographers whose work looks and feels nothing like mine. But I think that's more out of, I'm not trying to be ecumenical here, my tastes range much further

than my personal work. As far as people who work in a similar vein in Quebec, I think probably the closest person is Clara. She mentioned that she'd spent a summer before doing the parks working with eight by ten and doing sort of formalist-type work, and I think that was probably the closest our work has been for many years in terms of content and presentation. There are lots of people whose work I like in Quebec, but as far as leading somewhere from mine, I'm not sure that that is appropriate. I've always maintained a conscious effort, I think, not to tie into a lot of the work that was done in Quebec. I know that back in the sort of iconoclastic ovo days, when everybody was lining people up against brick walls and shooting them, I mean with a camera, I was still backing off across the street and doing fairly formalist architecture work and I used to go around claiming that a hundred years from now everybody would see all these people lined up against brick walls and they wouldn't know where it was shot, what kind of milieu they inhabited, and that my photographs, whether people were interested in them for themselves, would provide kind of background or context for these other works to be fit into. The only problem with that is, we usually tended to shoot in different neighbourhoods. By personality, the people with the 35-mm's would head for populated neighbourhoods and I would head for what used to be very unpopulated warehouse district, on Sunday, late in the afternoon.

DAVID MILLER SOLILOQUY

Lily Koltun once said, "The builders of the 19th century applied specific forms to specific architectural functions. Their choice was based on appropriate symbolic content. Big buildings were weighty symbols of the nature and importance of their functions in the moral and intellectual organization of their society. Churches were increasingly built in the spiritual and Christian Gothic style, while banks and post offices declaimed their rectitude in prosperous variants of the virtuous Classical style. Industrial buildings, whose function was newer to the value system of the society, were considered to have no style, and had to make their point through sheer size. In the 20th century the spiritual and virtuous Classical style of churches and banks are sufficiently self-evident to need no interpretation. In an increasingly urban and technologically-oriented world, society worships new gods, and anonymous industrial structures have become the new cathedrals."